IGF 2022
Policy Network on Internet Fragmentation
(PNIF)

What does internet fragmentation mean to you ?
Identifying fragmentation and key stakeholders.   PNIF Webinar, 15 September 2022

Highlights

- The PNIF aims to further multistakeholder discussion on Internet fragmentation - the concept, causes and effects - and explore ways to address fragmentation.

- A fragmented internet is an internet that is not the interoperable single internet we have today. The open, interoperable internet that respects human rights and allows for critical access is an ideal that hasn't been achieved before but is at risk of being undermined even more. The internet has never been not fragmented. Varying levels of fragmentation are consistent with the internet's development. However, there are concerns that severe fragmentation might cause malfunctioning or breaking of the internet.

- Fragmentation can be caused by technical, governmental, or commercial practices. Controlling what people can say and see online and legitimate attempts to address harms associated with internet use are driving forces behind policies that (intended or unintended) lead to internet fragmentation. IPv4/IPv6 is a cautionary tale and shows the time and effort needed to manage fragmentation caused by incompatible technical protocols.

- Some questioning of the unifying discourse defending open and inclusive, multistakeholder and human rights oriented internet governance underpinning an open and interoperable internet could be a sign of a looming fragmentation or multi-polarisation of internet governance.

- The narrative of fragmentation is becoming a mainstream narrative in international relations, and risks replacing the narrative of an ideal open interoperable inclusive neutral internet, and security issues and international competition policy issues are added into the fragmentation discourse, increasing pressure for localisation policies and competition policies connected to localisation. This worrying evolution may impact multilateral cooperation and the involvement of states in the multistakeholder model.

- Both multilateral and multistakeholder spaces are relevant and the multilateral system could react by agreeing on minimal denominators. Limiting collaboration to like-minded trusted nations that share similar values, might lead to a discrimination and affect the connectivity of people living in those countries. Human rights or climate change frameworks can provide lessons on how the international community coordinates actions around common minimal denominators.

- Any layered approach to internet fragmentation must acknowledge the layer-specific governance mechanisms, actors and consensus building mechanisms. It is important to

focus on the critical properties of the internet and how they are affected and the availability of alternatives should be considered when assessing fragmentation and prioritising action.

- The GDC is an opportunity to insert certain common principles all stakeholders agree about. Of equal importance is the need for further and more precise discussion about fragmentation, practices and what should or shouldn't be done, including a dialogue with policy makers on how legitimate goals can be achieved without interfering with the internet's interoperability.

Links
- IGF Policy Network on Internet Fragmentation
https://www.intgovforum.org/en/content/policy-network-on-internet-fragmentation
- PNIF Webinar 1 - What does internet fragmentation mean to you ? Identifying fragmentation and key stakeholders. meeting recording